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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIAN CONCERN OVER RUSSIA'S "CREEPING ANNEXATION" OF ABKHAZIA

REF: A. TBILISI 536

[B.](#) TBILISI 388

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: In a series of recent meetings with the Group of Friends of the Secretary General, Georgian government officials have expressed their strong concern that Russia continues to take steps to increase ties with the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In an April 8 meeting with the western Friends, First Deputy Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze said recent Russian actions, including Russian withdrawal from CIS sanctions against Abkhazia (ref B), a Russian request to conduct extradition negotiations with the Abkhaz for Russian citizens being held in Abkhazia and a letter from Russian President Putin to de-facto presidents Bagapsh and Kokoiti are further evidence that Russia is pursuing its strategy of "creeping annexation". Vashadze called on the Friends to protest these Russian actions. In a separate meeting with the Group of Friends, including Russia, State Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili warned that an "iron curtain" blocking people-to-people contacts has descended on Georgia's borders with the separatist regions and Russia and key Abkhaz were doing all they could to keep it in place. Yakobashvili laid out Georgia's "three principles" for dealing with the conflicts: no war, no to negotiating formats that do not yield results, and direct people-to-people confidence building measures. Both Vashadze and Yakobashvili repeatedly emphasized Georgia's desire for a peaceful solution to the conflicts, stressing that Georgia would "be responsible" in the face of Russian provocations. End summary.

Russia's "creeping annexation" of Abkhazia

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[¶](#)2. (C) In an April 8 meeting with the western Friends, First Deputy Foreign Minister Vashadze told the group that Georgia was thankful for Bucharest and "thrilled" with the NATO communique on future Georgian membership, but was concerned that Georgia not receiving a Membership Action Plan (MAP) would be viewed as an opportunity by Russia to further increase tension in the conflict zones. He said that Moscow has decided on a strategy designed to test Georgia's patience and will do everything short of formal recognition to improve Russia's ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He noted in particular a letter from Russian President Putin to Abkhaz de-facto president Bagapsh and South Ossetian de-facto president Kokoiti, which was also published on the Russian MFA website. According to the Georgians, this was the first time Putin had ever directly corresponded with the separatist leaders, and Vashadze took it as yet another sign that Russia was "testing the waters" on how far they could go short of formal recognition. He also claimed that Georgia had evidence that Russia was moving light armaments into Abkhazia

and cautioning its citizens to "remain vigilant." Vashadze also distributed a non-paper (faxed to EUR/CARC) calling on the governments of the Friends to protest these Russian actions at the United Nations. He asked the Friends to convey their "unequivocal alarm" over the situation in Abkhazia and to tell Russia directly that the international community will not allow Russia to cross the red lines which define Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Vashadze said Russia was getting perilously close to crossing Georgia's red lines.

Vashadze: Georgia will "behave responsibly"

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¶3. (C) During his meeting with the Friends, Vashadze repeatedly emphasized that Georgia will "be responsible" in response to Russian provocations in the conflict zones. He stressed that the Georgian government wanted a peaceful solution to the conflicts and wants to "do the right thing." Georgia will do everything in its power to prevent being provoked, he said, and the Georgians have told the Russians that they want to work with them on solving the conflicts peacefully. Separately, on April 8, Foreign Minister Bakradze issued a statement thanking the governments of Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Azerbaijan for supporting Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity by not lifting sanctions against Abkhazia. Bakradze said he expected several other CIS countries to issue similar statements of support in the near future.

Yakobashvili outlines Abkhaz peace initiative

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¶4. (C) At an April 8 dinner with the Group of Friends,

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including Russia, Minister for Reintegration Yakobashvili expounded on President Saakashvili's Abkhaz peace initiative unveiled on March 28 (Ref A). Yakobashvili made clear that he and his staff had been working on the plan for a month and a half and it was not unveiled to boost Georgia's chances of receiving a MAP at Bucharest. He said the plan consisted of three blocks: creation of a vice-president post for the Abkhaz, a right to veto government decisions affecting Abkhaz constitutional status, and the creation of a free economic zone in Ochamchire and Gali. Yakobashvili emphasized that the three blocks were not a package and could be worked on individually, adding that he would propose creating two working groups, one Georgian and one international, to help the Georgians work with the Abkhaz in trying to implement these proposals. Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) Jean Arnault said he welcomed the proposals and thought it important to find ways to reassure the Abkhaz and bring them to the table. (Note: Speaking at a conference April 7, Yakobashvili said the Georgians had received some indications the Abkhaz leadership was interested in the free economic zone. While the Abkhaz had publicly rejected Saakashvili's initiative, Yakobashvili said it was significant they had said nothing about this economic component. End note).

¶5. (C) Yakobashvili said that unfortunately there was a small group of people in Abkhazia who believe that working with the Georgians constitutes treason and hamper Georgian efforts to engage in confidence building measures. He expressed his concern that an "iron curtain" had descended across Abkhazia and Russia was doing everything in its power to keep it in place and prevent meaningful people-to-people contacts. Yakobashvili stressed that Georgia had only peaceful intentions, repeating that Georgia has three principles for resolving the conflict: no war, rejecting negotiating mechanisms that do not yield results, and a "human-centric" approach based on direct people-to-people contact and proposals to meet the needs of the populations of the territories.

Comment

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¶6. (C) The Georgian government is deeply worried about the Russians "testing the waters" to see how much increased contact and support for the separatist regions they can get away with politically. Russia's decision in early March to unilaterally pull out of CIS economic and military sanctions on Abkhazia was the most prominent recent example, but other apparently symbolic steps like the Putin letters and Duma discussions of recognition and diplomatic missions, which reportedly are to turn into recommendations to the Russian government, also push the limits. As a result, the Georgians sometimes overreact to less serious or unconfirmed Russian actions. The Russian Ministry of Justice letter appears to be such a case: it asks the Georgians to agree to the movement of Russian prisoners from Abkhazia to Russia, in collaboration with Abkhaz "authorities." It does not threaten (at least explicitly) to do so without Georgia's approval and unless that happens it is unclear how the western Friends could help by objections to the letter in international fora. Indeed, it is quite possible that keeping the Georgians off-balance and prone to a mis-calculation is one of the goals of recent Russian actions. The Georgians are aware of this risk, as Yakobashvili and Vashadze indicated with their repeated comments about being careful not to be provoked. We will continue to reinforce this point. Still, there are some serious actions being undertaken or considered which do have the warlike impact of undermining Georgia's territorial integrity. We hope we can work with the western Friends to discourage future such steps by Russia, which has many times affirmed its commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity.

TEFFT